8.

What Now?

Something Menghis Samuel said the other day has stuck in my mind. In explaining the repositioning of our defense forces he told us to remember that we were fighting the war in Ethiopia's terms. He was referring to the 20:1 population advantage they had over us. They were in a position to send wave after wave of humanity to overwhelm our defense lines. They succeeded. In case you didn't know they had amassed 70,000 soldiers and 170 tanks pulled from the other fronts. They hit repeatedly at a specific point of the 60km defense line, finally making a breakthrough at Gemahalo.

For the TPLF, puncturing the defense lines is a matter of political survival, regardless of the cost. This is the second point we need to remember, a point that differentiates us from them. Their threshold for absorbing casualties is obscenely high. They have very little regard for the lives they are prepared to lose even for a short-term gain. Our defense force's culture is different. The bedrock of our defense strategy is to gain maximum advantage with minimum loss of life. Our strategists feel that defending the Badme line at all cost is not worth the potential loss of thousands of our brave ones when there is an alternative of repositioning our forces a few kilometers up the road. Going back to Menghis' reminder, we have to fight the war in our terms, even if that means giving the TPLF something to brag about. People whose knowledge of military affairs I respect tell me that militarily the strategic withdrawal is the right move.

Given our predicament at the Badme line, I don't think we have any choice but to accept the OAU proposal. Surely, it is a bitter pill. But then I have taken a lot of bitter pills in my life. Some worked; and some didn't. I don't know if our acceptance of the OAU proposal will work, that is, whether we will go straight to demarcation within six months. Although the TPLF has been telling everybody—the UN Security Council, the OAU, the EU, Clinton, and the rest of the world community—that Ethiopia had accepted the OAU framework, now we will see if the TPLF has been sincere. Until yesterday, the pressure has been on Eritrea to accept the OAU Framework. From today on the pressure will pass on to Ethiopia.

I am trying to be optimistic in thinking that Ethiopia will not go back on its word. But something tells me that it might, or place so many conditions that it might as well say no. I feel that Badme has never been the central issue for TPLF. The overthrow of the Eritrean government and its replacement with a Vichy like government has. The re-conquest of Badme only whets the TPLF's appetite for more, now that it smells blood. If Eritrea had made a Custer's last stand at Badme, and TPLF would have made effective use of its superior numbers and it would have persuaded the TPLF to march towards Asmara. As I see it, and I am no military analyst, the decision to abandon the Badme line can only be interpreted as one way of getting ready to fight the next war, if that is deemed necessary. But then Eritrea will fight in its own terms.

Eritrea's acceptance of the OAU's proposals puts the international community in a tight spot. They have been pressing Eritrea to accept the terms. Now that Eritrea has done just that, they have to deliver Ethiopia. Assistance from the U.S and EU has built Ethiopia's war machine. Aid funds have paid for the mercenaries who pilot the MiGs paid with Western assistance. Without help from the West , Ethiopia would not have been able to pay the Russian pilots, radar operators, gunners, and battery operators, who made a difference in the last round of the war. Those who paid for the war have a moral responsibility to find a way of stopping it. Whether they have the will, or the ability will be known in the next few days. But at least now the onus is on them. Eritrea's acceptance of the OAU proposal has put the West on the spot.

The withdrawal from the Badme line and the acceptance of the OAU proposal must be seen in its totality: military, political and diplomatic. The fact that our forces are still intact, while the same cannot be said for Ethiopia's, allows us to dictate the terms of the next round, if god forbid, it comes to that. Politically the TPLF can longer hide behind Badme...Badme...Badme when its objective is something else. Diplomatically the international community has to take a stand on war and peace and can no longer use our tardiness in accepting the OAU proposals as an excuse to do nothing. If we are lucky, we will no longer have to fight another war; if not, this may be the beginning of refighting the 30-year war of independence. A chilly prospect. All the more reason why taking a bitter pill, at this time, makes sense. We may not like its taste, but who knows, in the long run, it may do us some good.

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